

Queer Identity and Self-Discovery in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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Abstract: The representation of queer identity in contemporary literature has become an important area of discussion within gender studies, cultural studies, and literary criticism. Over the past few decades, writers have increasingly explored themes related to sexuality, identity, and personal freedom, challenging traditional social norms that privilege heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of identity. One such significant contribution to queer literature is *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. The novel presents a powerful and deeply personal narrative of identity formation within the constraints of a strict religious environment. It follows the life of the protagonist, Jeanette, who is raised in a conservative Pentecostal Christian household where religious beliefs strongly influence every aspect of daily life. As Jeanette grows older, she gradually becomes aware of her attraction toward women and begins to recognize her lesbian identity. This realization creates a conflict between her personal feelings and the rigid moral values imposed by her family and church community. The novel therefore portrays the emotional struggle that arises when an individual's identity conflicts with dominant cultural expectations. This paper examines the development of queer identity and the process of self-discovery in the novel through the theoretical perspectives of queer theory. Drawing upon the ideas of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault, the study explores how sexuality, religion, and institutional authority interact in shaping individual identity. Winterson's narrative challenges heteronormative structures and suggests that self-acceptance can become an act of resistance against social control. Through symbolic imagery, experimental narrative techniques, and autobiographical elements, the novel ultimately presents queer identity as a transformative journey toward personal freedom and self-realisation beyond traditional social boundaries.

Keywords: queer identity, lesbian identity, self-discovery, queer theory, gender studies, contemporary British literature

Introduction

During the late twentieth century, literature began to change the way it talked about gender, sexuality, and identity. Earlier literary works often presented sexuality as something fixed and naturally heterosexual. However, as feminist criticism and queer studies developed, many writers started questioning these traditional assumptions. Literature gradually became a space where different identities, experiences, and voices could be explored more openly. In this context, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson emerged as an important work that challenges conventional ideas about sexuality and personal identity. Published in 1985, the novel reflects the social and cultural atmosphere of a time when feminist and queer movements were gaining strength. The story is partly autobiographical and explores how personal identity develops within the pressures of religion, society, and family expectations. Through the life of its protagonist, Jeanette, the novel shows the emotional struggles faced by individuals whose identities do not fit into the traditional norms of society. Winterson presents these struggles in a thoughtful and sensitive way, highlighting the tension between individual freedom and social control.

The story takes place in a strict Pentecostal Christian community in northern England. Jeanette is adopted and raised by a deeply religious mother who believes that her daughter has been chosen by God for a special purpose. Because of this belief, Jeanette grows up in a very disciplined religious environment where faith shapes everyday life. From an early age, she is taught to see the world in simple moral terms: people are either good or sinful, believers or non-believers. This strict way of thinking leaves little room for questioning or accepting differences. As Jeanette grows older, however, she begins to experience feelings that do not fit within this rigid belief system.

When she realizes that she is attracted to women, it creates a serious conflict between her personal identity and the expectations of her religious community. For the church and her family, her sexuality is seen as wrong and sinful. They believe it must be corrected through prayer and religious discipline. As a result, Jeanette faces rejection, loneliness, and emotional confusion.

Despite these difficulties, Jeanette's journey becomes a story of self-discovery and personal growth. Slowly, she begins to understand that identity cannot always be explained through strict rules or religious teachings. Instead, identity develops through personal experiences, reflection, and the courage to accept oneself. Her journey shows that questioning authority and exploring one's true self can be an important step toward personal freedom. This paper argues that *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* presents queer identity as a process of self-discovery that challenges the authority of social and religious institutions. Using ideas from scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault, the study examines how the novel questions traditional beliefs about sexuality. Through symbolism, storytelling techniques, and autobiographical elements, Winterson shows that identity is not fixed but constantly developing. In doing so, the novel encourages readers to think about the importance of personal freedom and the right to define one's own identity beyond the limits set by society.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of queer theory, an important field of critical inquiry that developed in the late twentieth century. Queer theory emerged as a response to traditional ideas about gender and sexuality that treated heterosexuality as natural, universal, and socially dominant. Scholars working within this framework questioned the assumption that sexual identities are fixed or biologically determined. Instead, they argued that gender and sexuality are shaped by cultural expectations, social institutions, and power relations. By challenging established norms, queer theory seeks to examine how identities are constructed, regulated, and sometimes marginalized within society. One of the most influential thinkers in this field is Judith Butler, whose work has significantly shaped contemporary discussions of gender identity. Butler proposes that gender should not be understood as a stable or innate characteristic but rather as something that is repeatedly performed through social behavior. In her influential book *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is "performative," meaning that it is produced through repeated actions, social expectations, and cultural practices rather than determined by biology (Butler 45). According to this perspective, individuals learn to perform certain roles associated with masculinity or femininity through social conditioning. This concept is particularly relevant to *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* because the protagonist, Jeanette, grows up in an environment where strict expectations about gender and sexuality are imposed upon her. The religious community in which she is raised attempts to enforce a particular model of femininity that aligns with heterosexual norms, leaving little space for alternative identities.

Another key contribution to queer theory comes from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose work examines how Western culture structures sexuality through rigid binary oppositions. Sedgwick suggests that modern societies often organize sexual identity through categories such as heterosexual versus homosexual or normal versus deviant (Sedgwick 67). These binary frameworks simplify the complexity of human sexuality and reinforce social hierarchies that privilege heterosexuality while marginalizing other identities. Within such a system, individuals who do not conform to dominant expectations frequently experience exclusion, discrimination, or social stigma. In Winterson's novel, this binary logic is clearly visible in the worldview promoted by the Pentecostal community. The church encourages its members to interpret the world through strict moral divisions, which leaves no room for ambiguity or diversity in matters of identity.

In addition to Butler and Sedgwick, the work of Michel Foucault provides an important foundation for understanding how sexuality is shaped by systems of power. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that modern societies regulate sexual behaviour through institutions such as religion, medicine, and law. Rather than simply repressing sexuality, these institutions actively define what forms of sexual expression are considered

acceptable or unacceptable (Foucault 42). Through processes of classification, surveillance, and discipline, social institutions establish norms that determine how individuals should behave. As a result, sexuality becomes closely linked to broader structures of power and control. This theoretical perspective is particularly useful for interpreting the role of religion in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. In the novel, the church functions as a powerful institution that attempts to regulate the beliefs and behaviours of its members. When Jeanette's lesbian identity becomes known, the religious community treats it as a moral deviation that must be corrected. Through prayer sessions, public condemnation, and social pressure, the church attempts to restore conformity to its moral standards. These actions demonstrate how institutional authority seeks to control individual identity by defining certain forms of sexuality as sinful or abnormal.

By drawing upon the insights of Butler, Sedgwick, and Foucault, this study interprets Winterson's novel as a critique of the social structures that attempt to regulate gender and sexuality. The experiences of the protagonist illustrate how cultural norms and institutional power can shape personal identity, often creating conflict between individual self-understanding and societal expectations. At the same time, the narrative also suggests the possibility of resisting these constraints. Jeanette's journey toward self-acceptance represents a challenge to the rigid frameworks that seek to define and limit identity. Through this perspective, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* can be understood as a literary exploration of how individuals negotiate identity within systems of power while striving to achieve personal autonomy and self-definition.

Religion and Institutional Control

Religion plays a central role in shaping the early identity and worldview of Jeanette in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. From the very beginning of the novel, Jeanette's life is deeply influenced by the strict religious beliefs of the Pentecostal community in which she is raised. Her adoptive mother is an intensely devoted member of the church and believes that her daughter has been chosen by God for a special spiritual purpose. Because of this belief, Jeanette is raised with the expectation that she will grow up to become a missionary and dedicate her life to religious service. Religion therefore becomes not only a belief system but also a powerful framework through which Jeanette understands the world and her place within it.

During her childhood, Jeanette is surrounded by religious teachings that shape her moral understanding and social behaviour. The church community emphasizes obedience, discipline, and strict adherence to religious doctrine. Sermons, prayers, and church gatherings are an essential part of everyday life, reinforcing the idea that faith must guide every decision and action. Within this environment, the outside world is often portrayed as morally dangerous and spiritually corrupt. Those who do not follow the teachings of the church are frequently described as misguided or sinful. As a result, Jeanette grows up with a limited and highly structured view of society. Jeanette herself reflects on this rigid worldview when she observes, "We were brought up to believe that there were only two sides in the world: the saved and the unsaved" (Winterson 24). This statement reveals the strong binary logic that governs the religious community. Individuals are categorised as either morally righteous or morally fallen, leaving little room for complexity or individual difference. Such a perspective simplifies human identity into clear divisions between good and evil, belief and disbelief, purity and corruption. Consequently, any form of behaviour that does not align with religious doctrine is automatically treated as deviant or unacceptable.

The strict moral framework of the church becomes particularly evident when Jeanette develops a romantic relationship with another girl. Within the context of the Pentecostal community, homosexuality is regarded as a serious moral transgression. When Jeanette's sexuality becomes known, the reaction of the church is immediate and severe. Rather than attempting to understand her feelings or experiences, the religious leaders interpret her identity as a spiritual problem that must be corrected. They organise prayer sessions and attempt to perform exorcisms in order to remove what they believe to be sinful influences. Through these actions, the church seeks to restore conformity to its moral expectations. This response demonstrates how religious institutions can function



as systems of social regulation. The church does not simply express disapproval of Jeanette's identity; it actively attempts to reshape her behavior in order to align with its established norms. Such efforts illustrate the broader mechanisms through which institutions attempt to control individual identity and maintain ideological authority. In this context, sexuality becomes a site where power and moral judgment intersect.

The actions of the church in the novel can be understood through the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains that modern institutions often regulate human behavior by defining certain forms of sexuality as normal while labeling others as deviant (Foucault 42). By establishing these categories, institutions reinforce social norms and exercise control over individuals. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the Pentecostal church performs exactly this function by identifying heterosexuality as morally acceptable while condemning homosexuality as sinful. Through this portrayal, Winterson highlights the ways in which religious authority can shape personal identity and restrict individual freedom. The church's attempt to discipline Jeanette's sexuality reveals the tension between institutional power and personal self-understanding. At the same time, this conflict becomes an important step in Jeanette's journey toward self-discovery. By confronting the limitations imposed by her community, she gradually begins to question the authority of the religious structures that once defined her life. In this way, the novel not only depicts the influence of religion on identity formation but also exposes the challenges faced by individuals who seek to assert their authentic selves within restrictive social environments.

Autobiographical Elements and Identity Formation

One of the most striking features of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is its strong autobiographical dimension, which contributes significantly to the depth and authenticity of the narrative. Although the novel is presented as a work of fiction, many aspects of the protagonist Jeanette's life closely resemble the personal experiences of its author, Jeanette Winterson. Like the central character in the novel, Winterson herself was adopted and raised in a strict Pentecostal Christian household in northern England. Her childhood was deeply shaped by religious teachings, and she was encouraged to pursue a religious vocation. However, as she grew older and began to understand her sexual identity, she experienced conflict with the religious beliefs and expectations imposed by her family and community. These parallels between the author's life and the fictional narrative give the novel a powerful sense of realism and emotional intensity. The autobiographical elements present in the novel allow Winterson to explore the complex process of identity formation in a deeply personal way. Through Jeanette's experiences, the narrative portrays the struggles faced by individuals who attempt to reconcile their inner sense of self with the rigid expectations of their social environment. The protagonist's emotional conflicts, feelings of isolation, and eventual journey toward self-acceptance reflect a broader exploration of how identity develops in the face of institutional pressure and cultural norms. Because these experiences are closely connected to the author's own life, they are presented with a level of psychological insight and emotional authenticity that strengthens the narrative.

Many scholars have recognized the significance of this autobiographical dimension in Winterson's work. Critics often argue that the novel operates in a space between personal memoir and imaginative storytelling. Rather than presenting a strictly factual account of her life, Winterson reshapes her experiences through fiction, symbolism, and narrative experimentation. This approach allows her to move beyond simple autobiography and to address broader questions about identity, belonging, and resistance. Literary critic Susana Onega highlights this aspect of the novel when she observes that Winterson deliberately blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. According to Onega, the narrative "blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction in order to reconstruct the experience of identity formation" (Onega 104). In other words, the novel does not merely retell personal events; instead, it transforms those experiences into a broader literary exploration of how identity develops under conditions of social constraint. By blending memory, imagination, and symbolic storytelling, Winterson creates a

narrative that captures both the emotional truth of personal experience and the wider cultural realities faced by many individuals.

The autobiographical nature of the text also helps readers understand the broader social context in which the story unfolds. Jeanette's experiences are not presented as isolated or unique; rather, they reflect the struggles faced by many individuals whose identities challenge dominant cultural norms. Through the protagonist's journey, the novel illustrates how institutions such as family, religion, and community influence the development of personal identity. At the same time, it highlights the courage required to question these structures and to pursue self-understanding. By combining elements of personal history with fictional storytelling, Winterson creates a narrative that resonates on both individual and collective levels. The story of Jeanette becomes more than a personal account; it becomes a representation of the wider search for identity experienced by many people navigating restrictive social environments. In this way, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* demonstrates how literature can transform personal experience into a powerful exploration of identity, resistance, and self-discovery.

Symbolism and Narrative Structure

One of the most distinctive aspects of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is its unusual narrative structure and its rich use of symbolism. Jeanette Winterson does not follow a completely traditional or linear storytelling style. Instead, she combines realistic narrative with symbolic and imaginative elements that deepen the thematic meaning of the novel. Through this creative narrative technique, Winterson explores the complexities of identity, belief, and personal transformation. A notable structural feature of the novel is that its chapters are named after books of the Bible, such as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This structural choice immediately signals the strong influence of religion on the protagonist's life. Since Jeanette grows up in a strict Pentecostal household, religious teachings shape her understanding of morality, society, and identity. By organizing the novel according to biblical books, Winterson emphasizes how deeply religious ideology structures Jeanette's early worldview. At the same time, this technique allows the author to subtly reinterpret biblical narratives in ways that challenge traditional religious authority.

In addition to this biblical framework, the novel frequently interrupts the main narrative with fairy tales, legends, and myth-like stories. These embedded narratives may initially appear unrelated to Jeanette's personal story, but they often serve symbolic purposes. Many of these allegorical tales mirror the emotional and psychological struggles experienced by the protagonist. For example, stories about lonely heroes, wandering travelers, or misunderstood figures reflect Jeanette's own search for belonging and self-understanding. Through these symbolic narratives, Winterson creates a layered storytelling style in which imagination and reality interact with one another. This narrative experimentation reflects the postmodern literary style for which Winterson is well known.

Symbolism also plays an important role in conveying the central themes of the novel. Among the many symbolic images used throughout the narrative, the recurring image of oranges is particularly significant. Jeanette's mother frequently insists that oranges are the only acceptable fruit and repeatedly offers them as a solution to every situation. On the surface, this detail may appear humorous or trivial, but it carries deeper symbolic meaning. The insistence that oranges are the only fruit represents the rigid and narrow ideology imposed by the religious community. Just as Jeanette's mother believes that oranges are the only proper choice, the church believes that its moral and social values are the only correct way to live. As the story progresses, Jeanette begins to question this rigid worldview. One of the most important moments of realization occurs when she reflects that "oranges are not the only fruit" (Winterson 110). This statement becomes a powerful metaphor for the discovery that life offers many possibilities beyond the limited options defined by social and religious authority. The metaphor suggests that identity, like fruit, exists in many forms and cannot be restricted to a single acceptable category.

Through this symbolic image, Winterson challenges the assumption that heterosexuality is the only legitimate form of identity. The realization that "oranges are not the only fruit" represents Jeanette's growing awareness that

alternative ways of living and loving are possible. It marks an important step in her journey toward self-acceptance and independence. Overall, the combination of biblical structure, allegorical storytelling, and symbolic imagery creates a rich and layered narrative. These techniques allow Winterson to explore complex themes related to identity, belief, and freedom in a creative and engaging way. By blending realism with symbolic and imaginative elements, the novel invites readers to question rigid social norms and to consider the many possibilities that exist beyond traditional definitions of identity.

Self-Discovery and Personal Transformation

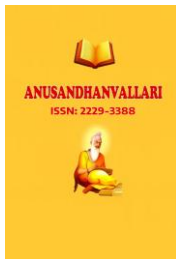
Jeanette's journey of self-discovery forms the emotional heart of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. As the story unfolds, Jeanette gradually begins to understand who she truly is while living in a community that strongly rejects her identity. In the early part of the novel, she sincerely believes in the teachings of the Pentecostal church where she has been raised. Her life is shaped by strict religious beliefs, and she tries to follow the expectations placed upon her by her mother and the church. Because of this upbringing, Jeanette initially struggles to reconcile her growing feelings with the religious values she has been taught to respect. When Jeanette begins to realize that she is attracted to another girl, she experiences deep confusion and emotional conflict. She does not immediately reject the beliefs of the church; instead, she tries to understand whether her feelings can somehow fit within the moral framework she has grown up with. However, when the church community discovers her relationship, their reaction is harsh and unforgiving. Rather than showing compassion, the religious leaders treat her sexuality as a sin that must be corrected. Jeanette becomes aware of the rigid way her community views the world, reflecting that "we were brought up to believe that there were only two sides in the world: the saved and the unsaved" (Winterson 24). This statement reveals how strongly the church divides people into fixed moral categories, leaving little room for personal difference or individuality.

As Jeanette faces rejection and criticism, she slowly begins to question the beliefs that once shaped her understanding of life. This moment becomes the beginning of an important personal transformation. She realizes that her identity cannot simply be determined by the expectations of her family or the authority of the church. Instead, she starts to understand that life offers many possibilities beyond the limited choices she has been taught. This realization is expressed through the novel's most famous metaphor: "Oranges are not the only fruit" (Winterson 110). In this moment, Jeanette recognizes that just as there are many kinds of fruit, there are also many ways of living and understanding oneself.

Jeanette's journey toward self-acceptance is not easy. She experiences loneliness, emotional pain, and a sense of isolation as she struggles to balance her identity with the expectations of her community. Leaving behind the beliefs that once defined her life is a difficult process, but it also allows her to grow stronger and more independent. Through these experiences, Jeanette learns to trust her own understanding of who she is. By the end of the novel, Jeanette gains the courage to move beyond the rigid beliefs that once controlled her life. Although this choice distances her from the familiar world of her childhood, it also gives her the freedom to accept her identity honestly. Winterson presents this journey as a powerful example of personal growth, showing that self-discovery often requires individuals to question authority and embrace the courage to live authentically.

Queer Identity as Resistance

One of the important ideas in queer theory is that identity itself can become a form of resistance against systems that try to control how people live and express themselves. Many societies create strict rules about gender and sexuality, often presenting heterosexuality as the only normal or acceptable form of identity. When individuals openly accept identities that challenge these norms, they question the authority of the social structures that attempt to regulate their lives. In this way, queer identity can become a powerful act of resistance against systems that enforce conformity and suppress difference. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, Jeanette's acceptance of her sexuality becomes an example of this kind of resistance. Throughout the novel, she grows up in



a deeply religious Pentecostal community where strict beliefs about morality and sexuality shape everyday life. The church strongly promotes heterosexuality as the only acceptable way of living, and any deviation from this expectation is treated as sinful. When Jeanette's relationship with another girl becomes known, the church community reacts with condemnation. Religious leaders attempt to correct what they see as a moral failure through prayer and spiritual intervention.

However, as Jeanette reflects on her experiences, she gradually begins to question the authority of the church and the beliefs she has been taught since childhood. Instead of denying her feelings, she begins to understand that her identity cannot simply be shaped by the expectations of others. Her decision to accept her sexuality challenges the rigid ideology of the church and disrupts the system that attempts to define her life. In this way, her personal journey becomes a quiet but powerful act of resistance.

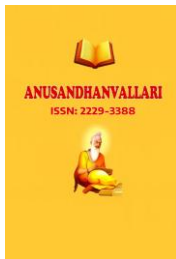
The significance of this resistance can also be understood through the ideas of Judith Butler, who explains that social norms about gender and sexuality are maintained through repeated cultural expectations (Butler 45). When individuals refuse to follow these expectations, they expose the limits of the systems that enforce them. Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that societies often organize sexuality through strict categories such as heterosexual and homosexual, normal and deviant (Sedgwick 67). These divisions create hierarchies that privilege certain identities while marginalizing others. Winterson's novel challenges these assumptions by presenting Jeanette's sexuality not as a moral failing but as a natural part of her identity. As literary critic Merja Makinen observes, the novel portrays lesbian identity as a legitimate form of self-expression rather than a deviation from social norms (Makinen 78). Through Jeanette's journey, the narrative encourages readers to question the belief that heterosexuality is the only natural form of identity.

Broader Cultural Significance

The importance of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* extends far beyond its literary style or narrative structure. Since its publication in 1985, the novel has played a significant role in expanding the representation of queer identities within modern literature. At a time when openly lesbian narratives were rarely visible in mainstream British fiction, Winterson's work introduced readers to a story that addressed sexuality, identity, and personal freedom with honesty and sensitivity. During the late twentieth century, discussions about gender and sexuality were becoming more visible in both academic and public spaces. Feminist movements and LGBTQ activism were challenging traditional assumptions about gender roles and sexual identity. Literature became an important platform for exploring these changing ideas. Within this context, Winterson's novel contributed to a growing body of work that presented alternative perspectives on identity and belonging.

Scholars have noted that the novel helped bring queer narratives into wider literary discussion. Susana Onega points out that Winterson's writing represents a significant moment in contemporary British literature because it openly addresses issues of sexuality and identity (Onega 112). By blending autobiographical elements with creative storytelling, the novel offers readers an intimate portrayal of the emotional and social challenges faced by individuals who question traditional norms.

The novel also reflects broader cultural debates about religion, sexuality, and personal freedom. The conflict between Jeanette and her religious community represents the tension between traditional beliefs and evolving understandings of identity. Through this conflict, the novel encourages readers to consider how social institutions influence personal lives and how individuals negotiate their identities within restrictive environments. Even today, the themes explored in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* remain highly relevant. Conversations about LGBTQ rights, social acceptance, and personal identity continue to shape contemporary society. Winterson's novel reminds readers that the struggle for identity and equality is an ongoing process. By portraying Jeanette's journey toward self-acceptance, Winterson ultimately highlights the importance of personal freedom and authenticity. The novel suggests that individuals must sometimes challenge established norms in order to understand themselves fully. In



doing so, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* continues to inspire readers to think about identity, difference, and the courage required to live honestly.

Conclusion

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson remains an important work in contemporary queer literature because of its thoughtful exploration of identity and self-discovery. Through Jeanette's experiences, the novel shows how difficult it can be to accept one's identity within a strict religious and social environment. Winterson highlights how institutions such as family and religion can shape personal beliefs while also limiting individual freedom. Jeanette's journey demonstrates that identity is not fixed or predetermined. Instead, it develops through personal experience, reflection, and the courage to question established norms. By portraying Jeanette's lesbian identity as natural and meaningful, the novel challenges the idea that heterosexuality is the only acceptable form of identity. Ultimately, the story emphasises the importance of self-acceptance and personal freedom. Jeanette's growth shows that true independence comes from having the courage to define oneself beyond the expectations of society. Even today, the novel continues to encourage readers to respect diversity and recognise the value of living authentically.

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